

The Myth of Tribal Warfare: an Examination of Pre and Post European Conflict in Kurnai Gippsland

by Peter Gardner

(this essay was originally written in 2005 as part of a series which was partially a response to the Windschuttle thesis)

I recently came across an essay by Barry Smith in the Australian Book Review No. 270 April 2004 entitled "The 'History Wars' and Aboriginal Health". He wrote:

"Some among the blame-layers invoke genocide, wrongly in my view, except perhaps in Queensland. Rightists dispute the reality or size of some alleged 'massacres', but acknowledge others and casual killings involving the deaths of hundreds of people, while stressing the efforts of colonial and imperial authorities to prevent violence and punish perpetrators. **The seemingly frequent intertribal battles that result in deaths and injuries are under-investigated by all parties.** In 1844 Chief Protector Robinson saw the scattered bones of Gippsland adults and children slaughtered by the Omeo people, and one of the worst such killings."(1) (my emphasis)

Smith's article indicates that he is not familiar with the vast literature on frontier conflict. His generalization about tribal warfare appears wrong on several accounts and for Gippsland at least, as I will outline below, such clashes as they occurred were neither 'frequent' nor 'under-investigated'. The same criticism applies to his generalization that: "many of the black killings occurred in tribal fights, which may have intensified as whites took the best ceremonial and food-gathering places, abducted women and supplied tomahawks" which is not substantiated by fact.(2)

Smith asserts that "the swift, massive fall in Aboriginal numbers, by thousands, had it been effected mainly by guns and alleged poisons, would have left much more Aboriginal testimony, private records and official paper to survive to the present. We must look elsewhere to account for the calamity."(3) Again the statement does not stand up to close scrutiny. This argument is very close to that of Windschuttle who argues that only official records of conflict and massacres are valid and excludes all else. One wonders how this applies to the region of Gippsland (and presumably many other once remote locations) where there was no Government official for 4 years. As for Aboriginal testimony that also exists as the published work of Phillip Pepper shows. For over a period of fifteen years I searched all the valid records I could find on the subject of frontier conflict to come to a conclusion opposite to that of Smith. Occasionally pieces of information still surface as these essays indicate. But it is unlikely that the evidence that Smith requires to validate his thesis, certainly for Gippsland, will now be found.

However it is necessary to examine his assertions in regard to Gippsland history. In doing so I will apply what some may consider a narrow definition of tribal warfare, as that between neighbouring - and obviously antagonistic - tribes, and occurring before European occupation. This is because the Europeans distorted and changed tribal life in a number of ways. As Smyth states: "After the arrival of Europeans, new implements

were used and new methods of warfare (were) adopted..."(4) It is therefore necessary to examine the events separately for the pre and post European periods.

Pre-European

The main problem here is that there are few records relating to the Kurnai tribes of Gippsland except for folk history, with only three, or perhaps four, of these events that can be classified as tribal warfare being recorded.(5) None of these events occurred on Kurnai territory.(6) General knowledge about tribal conflicts from Howitt and other sources, implies that these events were never wholesale massacres and that both women and children were usually taken captive rather than killed. In one of Howitt's two examples only one old man was killed.(7) Since the weaponry on both sides was approximately equal only when one side was vastly superior in numbers to the other could any substantial or 'severe' killing have taken place. The accounts of Smyth and Howitt suggest that with few exceptions the mortality incurred in these clashes was low. Smyth noted: "... in a great fight one or more of them may be killed; but the warriors are not often mortally wounded during an engagement."(8) and "Mr Thomas states that of all the fights he has seen he has never known but of one death to arise from their frays. He has seen desperate wounds inflicted very often, but none but one was mortal." (9)

Smyth describes a general affray as follows:

"A great battle between two tribes is not a brawl - a brutal, savage, bloodthirsty onset - but generally a well-devised set-to between the fighting men of each side. Towards the end, when the blood is heated - when the yells and screams of the women and children are added to the hoarse shouts of the warriors, when wives rush in to protect their husbands, and mothers cling to their sons to help them and shelter them - there are many blows struck in anger, and much mischief is occasionally done; but the combats between the fighting men are not usually attended by very serious consequences. The jumping, dancing, and spear-throwing induce a copious perspiration, and the war paint begins to take new forms, and the ornaments they have assumed get disarranged; but beyond these casualties and a few ugly knocks, they come out of the fight most often unscathed." (10)

Unlike Howitt, Smyth does not differentiate between blood feuds and tribal war. Also Smyth does not appear to have had a Victorian example of tribal opponents speaking separate languages and thus it is not clear that he was recording a tribal war rather than an intra-tribal squabble or feud. Smyth concludes that tribal warfare was more or less conducted along the same lines across Australia (11) and in general the Aborigines are "honourable and open in their warfare with one another..."(12)

The logic of 'severe' or one-sided tribal war suggests that, over time, 'weak' tribes would have tended to disappear or at least been subsumed into a neighbouring, dominant tribe. On the other hand if such 'severe' wars were either rare, or their numbers roughly equal, then tribal identity and a rough 'balance of power' would have been maintained between tribes. My own view is that the latter factor probably applied at the time of European occupation. Geographically, with one exception, the tribes of the Kurnai and their neighbours all seemed to occupy roughly approximate areas of territory.(13) This would also suggest a rough balance between tribes numerically.

Alfred Howitt outlined in detail the rules pertaining to conflict - both intra-tribal and inter-tribal - and in particular emphasized the difference between the feud and tribal war. Pre-European conflict was governed by a complex set of rules. For instance, during tribal war a form of ceremonial cannibalism was practiced by the Kurnai and their enemies. But this practice of consuming flesh was definitely forbidden in any case of death as a result of intra-tribal conflict or a family feud. Also of importance when examining the detail of these conflicts is the fact that children were usually taken captive and adopted (14) and that women were generally claimed by their captors as their wives. Alfred Howitt recorded the only detailed example of tribal warfare - between Gippsland and Omeo tribes - in the pre-European period: that women were generally claimed by their captors as their wives. Alfred Howitt recorded the only detailed example of tribal warfare - between Gippsland and Omeo tribes - in the pre-European period:

"A number of Kurnai were camped high up on the Tambo River, near the Brajerak country. Some of the men came upon fresh tracks of the Brajerak...Then they got their spears ready. Some men went to hunt for food to leave with the women, for they might be two or three days away. Other men fixed pieces of sharp quartz in their spears with gum...they danced nearly all the night. But they did not sing. They were quite silent, and only made gestures and stamped their feet. In the middle of the night they all marched off well armed...The dawn was coming. They all rapidly painted themselves with pipeclay - red ochre is no use, it cannot frighten the enemy - and divided, so as to surround the camp. The spies whistled like birds, to tell when all was ready. Then all ran in: they speared away, they speared away! They only speared the men, and perhaps some children. Whoever caught a woman kept her himself. Then they eat the skin of the Brajeraks." (15)

Two other tribal conflicts were reported in Gunson from the records of William Thomas. Gunson refers to raids by the Kurnai:

"In 1840 Thomas was told that long before Europeans had arrived there had been tribesmen living on French Island, but these had been massacred by a raiding party from Gippsland. There were tribal songs telling of these events. About 1833-4 another massacre is reputed to have taken place on the western side of Tooradin when about 25 of the Bunerong tribe were killed 'in the gray of the morning'.(16)

Both these events sound a trifle far-fetched as they involve incursions by the Brataulung Kurnai deep into Bunerong territory with them inflicting substantial casualties on one side only. This is particularly so in the instance of French Island where considerable skill would be required to enable a large group to reach the island undetected and with much larger associated risks than a land based raiding party. To kill 25 individuals would seem to require a numerical superiority of at least 2:1 which would require a very large raiding party. This figure could be reduced if those killed included women and children. As far as I am aware there is no other evidence which can throw any light on these events. The implication is that there were few or no survivors and that they were one-sided affairs. I accept that these events probably occurred but doubt the details and the casualties apportioned to them.

Post European

I have dealt with this period in some detail in my previous work - most notably in *Through Foreign Eyes* - and argue that all the clashes that occurred after occupation were, at best, influenced in some way, and at worst, heavily distorted by, European presence. Some Europeans manipulated the facts surrounding evidence of supposed tribal clashes. It appears, for instance, that tribal warfare became a good excuse for a pile of bones that showed evidence of a violent demise, that were in fact inflicted by, or with the connivance of, Europeans. The clash described by Robinson between Omeo and Gippsland tribal groups and used by Smith as a case of tribal warfare is in fact an example of this. Squatters also used their Aboriginal stockmen to hunt and kill the local people. This procedure gave the squatters immunity and their stockmen - always from a different tribal area - were mounted and had guns. Patrick Coady Buckley's George Gilbert of the Liverpool tribe is one known example but most of the squatters in Gippsland had at least one stockman of this kind. For similar reasons tribal enmity was probably encouraged and hatreds exploited to avoid blame. Other distortions involved the complete breakdown of tribal rules and affiliations and the use of antiquated firearms and European roads.

The first post-European clash of note occurred in 1840, most likely in the Latrobe Valley. This affair was reported in Gunson:

"After four days' march through the barren mountains which separate Western Port district from Gippsland, then on the fifth day sighted the smoke of some fires on the skirts of the beautiful pastoral district there. On the following day, about mid-day, they surprised the camp, making prisoners of all in it, which consisted only of some old men and some children. They then went in search of the able-bodied men whom they espied busily fishing on the banks of a large river not far off. They managed to sneak up on them within ten or twenty yards, and then blazed into them, killing or severely wounding every one of them, seven in number. Those who escaped the first volley jumped into the river and swam across, but the second volley brought them all down. After cutting out their kidney fat, they took as much of the carcasses as they could carry on their return route, and having mustered their forces at the camp where they had captured the old men and the children, they despatched them also, and then commenced their retreat."(17)

The aberrations are obvious - the use of guns and the killing of the children - in a completely one-sided affair. It is of note that the women appear to have been missing, and may have been further removed from their camp gathering food. A maximum number of fifteen appear to have been killed.

About 1842 the event that Smith highlights in his essay as an example of tribal warfare occurred at Tambo Crossing. I have considered for a number of years that this was a massacre. My reasoning for such is as follows:- 1.the event occurred five to seven years after the settlement of the Omeo district 2.roads and tracks were obviously used for quick access by a relatively large group of Aboriginals 3.that the group almost certainly included two or more Europeans 4.that the efficiency of the killing implied the use of guns -"upwards of seventy" were killed whilst only two boys escaped 5.that the totality of the killing implied that the 'rules' of warfare were ignored and that women and children were also killed. This aberration is further highlighted by the fact that four women were captured and then later killed 6.finally no mention was made of any

casualty amongst the attackers, implying that there were none, and thus making it a completely one-sided affair. (18)

I have dealt with the 'white woman affair' and its aftermath for the period 1846-52 substantially in all my works and particularly in *Through Foreign Eyes* in the Chapters on Tyers and William Thomas. Tyers had noted in his 1853 report that "at least 30 of the Corner Inlet tribe were killed by Melbourne blacks under Gal Gal and Billy Lonsdale" and that another group of "about the same number" were killed when "the Upper Melbourne Road...was being opened". (19) This latter affair may be the same as the one included in Gunson above. The former was definitely related to the White Woman hunts. The role of the Native Police during this period is mostly undocumented. However aside from intimations of official involvement by a number of sources, almost certainly there were a number of attacks carried out by members of this body of their own accord. The "notorious Billy Lonsdale" may well have carried out an attack on the unfortunate members of the "Boole Boole". As well a number of ex-members of the Native Police, possibly at times mounted, trained in the use of firearms and sometimes armed with them, participated in these one sided affairs and, as William Thomas noted, often returned to Melbourne with female captives and human flesh. (20)

Finally in 1855 there occurred a number of disturbances in Gippsland that Howitt called "The last great battle of the clans". In their unusual alliances these clashes illustrated that the breakdown of Aboriginal society after 15 years of European occupation was almost complete. The accounts vary substantially. Most reliability is placed on the Howitt accounts although the dates given in the Dawson letter book establish a time framework for the events. Over a year there were 'tit for tat' killings from both sides involving raids, the use of guns and in one of the groups a highly unusual alliance with tribal members of former enemies. It is of note that a maximum possible number of 18 mortalities occurred during the 1855 events and the true number was probably a lot less.

Conclusion

In Gippsland tribal clashes were infrequent in the pre European period with the four events noted here possibly occurring as many as fifty years prior to the arrival of Europeans. The very rough estimate of casualties for clashes for the period 1790-1840 is from 60-80 individuals, only a very small proportion of which were Kurnai. Some of the fatalities in the post European period are included in my massacre estimates, including the event at Tambo Crossing, the depredations of Billy Lonsdale and the deaths of others during the White Woman hunts. These events possibly account for between 1 in 5 and 1 in 4 of my estimated deaths as a result of massacres of the Kurnai or about 120-150 individuals. The event quoted from Gunson above I have not previously considered as being part of this estimate but perhaps it should also qualify. One thing is clear. The advent of the Europeans completely altered the balance of power from a state that probably either favoured the Kurnai, or was delicately balanced, to one that was severely disadvantageous to them and for which they subsequently suffered with deaths on a substantial scale for a period of 10-15 years.

Notes

1. Smith, Barry. "The 'History Wars' and Aboriginal Health" in the [Australian Book Review](#) No. 270 April 2004
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*
4. Smythe, R.B. *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol 1 Govt. Printer, Melbourne, 1876 p.157

5. Ironically this is evidence which Windschuttle would ignore
6. As far as I am aware there is no documented incursion into Gippsland by any tribes in the pre-European period
7. Howitt, A.W. & Fison, L. *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*, George Robinson, Melbourne, 1880 (fac.ed.) p.215
8. Smyth, R.B. op. cit. p.155
9. *ibid.* p.160
10. *ibid.* p.156
11. *ibid.* p.160
12. *ibid.* p.162
13. with the exception of the Tatungalung
14. Howitt, A.W. & Fison, L. op. cit. p.334
15. Howitt, A.W. & Fison, L. op. cit. pp.213-4
16. Gunson, Neil. *The Good Country*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne 1968, p.6
17. *ibid.* p.7
18. for full details see Gardner, P.D. "Some Notes on Tribal Warfare and an Event at Tambo Crossing" in the Gippsland Heritage Journal No. 19 March 1996. In a recent letter (1.7.05) Smith suggested that the reference to 'Christians' may have been either a 'mistake' or a 'mistranscription'.
19. Gardner, P.D. *Through Foreign Eyes*, Centre for Gippsland Studies, Churchill, 1988, p.36
20. *ibid.* p.53